The Unity of Polarity in Shinran’s Religious Experience
—That Which Is Empty and False & That Which Is Unsurpassed—
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Living in the 21st century of the technologically highly-developed world of science, we witness wars and terrorist outrages, caused by human egoism, taking place routinely in many parts on this planet. With the development of scientific technology, the degree and extent of disasters is vast and immense. Science and technology, however, are useless and hopeless when we meet with devastating calamities, such as typhoons, hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes and tsunami. Everyday life, then, is filled with duhkha or suffering—birth, old age, sickness and death—accompanied by kleśa or blind passions, such as greed, anger and ignorance.

This paper first expounds the nature of things and beings, empty and false, elaborating the impermanent nature of things and the hopeless and helpless nature of people as bombu or foolish beings who inevitably suffer as they are attached to that which is impermanent. The paper then analyzes the religious experience of Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of Jôdo-Shinshû or Shin Buddhism in Japan, as he, realizing his innate nature of being a bombu, coincides with that which is unsurpassed, true and real—Shinran’s experience, in this way, constituting the unity of polarity or non-dualism—with the examination of the meanings of religious values in the contemporary world.

The Nature of Things—Impermanence and Dukkha

Dukkha arises as suffering when one is attached to that which is impermanent. Since everything is constantly changing and nothing is permanent without exception, duhkha as suffering is inevitable. This is known as the First Noble Truth of the Four Noble Truths, the Second Noble Truth being the cause, origin or arising of duhkha, which is one’s attachment

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1 This is known as one of the Three Marks of the Dharma, the other two marks being: a) Phenomenal things are all in existence by conditions and relationships; therefore, they are non-self or non-substantial, and b) Nirvana is the state of tranquility or quiescence.
to that which is impermanent. Attachment, even so, is the very proof or evidence of one’s being around in this sahā world of birth-and-death. Want, desire or clinging is what motivates us to take actions in life, which produces variously different modes of feelings and emotions including sorrow and joy. Since what we want, desire or cling to—whatever it is—is all impermanent and ever-changing after all, duhkha as suffering is inevitable.

Walpola Rahula in *What the Buddha Taught* views the conception of duhkha from three aspects—duhkha “as ordinary suffering,” duhkha “as produced by change” and duhkha “as conditioned states.”

Duhkha “as ordinary suffering” refers to:

All kinds of suffering in life like birth, old age, sickness, death, association with unpleasant persons and conditions, separation from beloved ones and pleasant conditions, not getting what one desires, grief, lamentation, distress—all such forms of physical and mental suffering, which are universally accepted as suffering or pain.

On duhkha “as produced by change,” Rahula says:

A happy feeling, a happy condition in life, is not permanent, nor everlasting. It changes sooner or later. When it changes, it produces pain, suffering, unhappiness.

As for the third norm of duhkha “as conditioned states,” Rahula expounds that it is “the most important philosophical aspect of the First Noble Truth, and it requires some analytical explanation of what we consider as a ‘being’, as an ‘individual’, or as ‘I’.” A ‘being,’ an ‘individual’ or ‘I’ is “only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates.” And the five aggregates themselves are nothing but duhkha.

He then goes on to say that “What we call a ‘being’, or an ‘individual’, or ‘I’, is only a convenient name or a label

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given to the combination of these five groups. They are all impermanent, all constantly changing.” Yet, we are all attached to this very self as a ‘being,’ an ‘individual’ or ‘I,’ and duhkha as suffering emerges.

Avidyā or ignorance can be replaced with attachment for the cause of duhkha—the Second Noble Truth of the Four Noble Truths. Ignorance involves one’s state of being ignorant about not being able to see things as they are. One just sees things as one sees them through one’s own perception, and perception varies from individual to individual. People are not seeing things exactly in the same way because of the self-centered nature of being and because people are all respectively different. This is natural; yet, because of this there often arise disputes and conflicts as one is not aware of the nature of one’s self-centeredness and egoism. It is easy and possible to see others’ self-centeredness and faults, but extremely hard to see one’s own. If one comes to realize the innate mode of one’s egoism, the problems taking place in daily life will become lessened. In an ultimate sense, it can be said then, while delusion is one’s state of not being able to see the fact that one is intrinsically deluded, enlightenment is a realization of one’s being able to see the mode of one’s delusion. In other words, one sees the state of one’s being deluded as one simultaneously comes to see that which is not deluded, i.e., that which is unsurpassed right in the middle of delusion. In such a way, the Buddha says, one who sees duhkha (the First Noble Truth) sees also the arising of duhkha (the Second Noble Truth), sees also the cessation of duhkha (the Third Noble Truth) and sees also the path leading to cessation of duhkha (the Fourth Noble Truth).

The Nature of Beings—Possessed of Blind Passions
Shinran expounds the nature of beings in terms of “foolish beings

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6 Ibid., p. 25.  
7 Dōgen says in “Genjō kōan” (“Things as They Are, Revealed in the Present”) of Shōbō genzō (Eye-Store-house of the Right Dharma): Delusion is one’s practicing and authenticating myriad things while carrying one’s self to them. Enlightenment is myriad things’ naturally practicing authenticating the self. Those who greatly enlighten delusion are Buddhas. Those who are greatly lost in enlightenment are sentient beings. Moreover, there are persons who attain enlightenment upon enlightenment and there are also persons who are deluded in their delusion.


8 What the Buddha Taught, p. 27.
possessed of blind passions” (bonnô gusoku no bombu). Foolish beings or ordinary beings (bombu) are the ones endowed with blind passions (bonnô) or kleśa. Blind passions are mental functions that annoy and disturb the body and mind of a person, and “greed,” “anger” and “ignorance” are known as the three poisonous blind passions (sandoku no bonnô). Though they disturb one’s body and mind, harming oneself as well as others, blind passions are the source and root of our lives in this world of birth-and-death or samsāra.⁹

They are likened to mud full of dirt without pure water. As lotus flowers symbolizing enlightenment then bloom right in the midst of this mud, so does the compassion or the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha emerge in our blind passions. Without blind passions enlightenment does not come about and bloom according to the principle of Mahayana Buddhism. On foolish beings, Shinran says in Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling:

*Foolish beings:* as expressed in the parable of the two rivers of water and fire, we are full of ignorance and blind passion. Our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves.¹⁰

In Chapter 9 of *Tannishô*, we find a well-known discourse between Yuien and Shinran. Yuien asks Shinran, his teacher:

Although I say the nembutsu, the feeling of dancing with joy is faint within me, and I have no thought of wanting to go to the Pure Land quickly. How should it be [for a person of nembutsu]?¹¹

When asked this, Shinran answered, “I, too, have had this question, and the same thought occurs to you, Yuien-bô!.” Shinran continues:

When I reflect deeply on it, by the very fact that I do not

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⁹ *Samsāra*, representing the six realms (hell, hungry spirits, animals, fighting spirits, humans and heavenly beings), here refers to this world of duhkha where one’s life is filled with sorrow and joy.


rejoice at what should fill me with such joy that I dance in the air and dance on earth, I realize all the more that my birth is completely settled. What suppresses the heart that should rejoice and keeps one from rejoicing is the action of blind passions. Nevertheless, the Buddha, knowing this beforehand, called us ‘foolish beings possessed of blind passions’; thus becoming aware that the compassionate Vow of Other Power is indeed for the sake of ourselves, who are such beings, we find it all the more trustworthy.\textsuperscript{12}

The Buddha, knowing beforehand the action and function of blind passions lurking in our body and mind, encompasses the whole of us. Thus, “Only the saying of the nembutsu, then, is the mind of great compassion that is thoroughgoing.”\textsuperscript{13} The mind of “thoroughgoing” (sue töri taru) is the core or heart of the compassionate Vow of Amida Buddha. While one sees one’s blind passions that are so strong,\textsuperscript{14} one comes to realize the compassionate Vow of Amida Buddha. In one’s realization of blind passions deeply rooted in one’s body and mind does the compassionate Vow manifest itself, which is known as the unity of polarity in existential philosophy\textsuperscript{15}—the two opposed qualities meet and coincide with each other, thereby constituting “non-dualism.”

\textbf{The Nature of Beings—Caught in Birth-and-Death}

There is another aspect of human nature that is innate to us according to Shinran’s understanding, which is “a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death” (zaiaiku shôji no bombu). Shinran takes this notion from Shan-tao’s \textit{Kangyôsho (Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra)},\textsuperscript{16} where he expounds two qualities of religious experience taking place at the same time, which is known as “two kinds of profound realizations” (nishu jinshin). One is the awareness of sentient beings (ki no

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 665.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Chapter 4 of \textit{Tannishô. Ibid.}, p. 663.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Shinran says, “Truly, how powerful our blind passions are!” Chapter 9 of \textit{Tannishô. Ibid.}, p. 666.
\item \textsuperscript{15} The expression, the unity of polarity, is adopted from philosophy of Kitarô Nishida (1870-1945)—\textit{zettai mujunteki jiko dôitsu}. In this paper, however, there is no discourse over the concept of the unity of polarity.
\item \textsuperscript{16} \textit{Shinshû shôgyô zensho} 1, complied, \textit{Shinshû shôgyô zensho hensansho} (Kyoto: Ôyagi Kobundo, 1941), p. 534.
\end{itemize}
The profound realization of oneself as incapable of enlightenment is to:

believe deeply and decidedly that you are a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation.  

The profound realization of Amida’s working partaken in one is to:

believe deeply and decidedly that Amida Buddha’s Forty-eight Vows grasp sentient beings, and that allowing yourself to be carried by the power of the Vow without any doubt or apprehension, you will attain birth.

These two realizations are taking place when one is undergoing religious experience, i.e., the coincidence of that which is untrue and false (realization of one’s limited and self-centered mode of being as a foolish or ordinary being—*ki no jinshin*) and that which is unsurpassed (the compassionate Vow of Amida Buddha working for the sake of such a being—*hô no jinshin*). This is again the unity of polarity and the formation of non-dualism, which is embodied in *myôgô* or the Name, i.e., *namu amida butsu, namu* referring to a foolish being and *amida butsu* referring to Amida Buddha. They are totally two different, opposite modes in qualities—one is delusion, while the other is enlightenment—yet they constitute “oneness” of non-dualism in the form of the Name.

Realization of a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death involves religious experience or shinjin as one realizes one’s self-centered mode of being, encountering the compassionate working of Amida Buddha. In day-to-day life, we cannot help but continuously commit evil

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17 *CWS* 1, p. 85.
19 Shinran in *Hymns of the Pure Land* reads: Those who say the Name in self-power, whether meditative or
deeds; some of us feel guilty just living—we have to eat in order to sustain our body, sacrificing other forms of life on the earth. On a larger scale, today’s science has made a great progress in terms of technological development. The contribution of technology to human comfort and modern convenience has been tremendously helpful, though the degree and extent of destruction and devastation of the planet and other forms of life, including other people, has been increasing proportionally.

Some may say that this cannot be helped, for it stems from adaptive evolution. Yet, a religious person deeply takes this into account (starting with conscious dietary choices), and becomes further concerned about the whole issue of why we are living and for what purpose we were born. Understanding this principle of living or life based on victims, one comes to realize that one’s karmic evil is caught in a birth-and-death cycle, and that hell is one’s destiny. No matter what practice one performs, one’s practice is contaminated with falsehood. Shinran says in “Gutoku’s Hymns of Lament and Reflection” in *Hymns of the Dharma-Ages*:

> Extremely difficult is it to put an end to our evil nature;  
> The mind is like a venomous snake or scorpion.  
> Our performance of good acts is also poisoned;  
> Hence, it is called false and empty practice.

This very awareness of one’s limited mode of being as such spontaneously leads Shinran to the profound realization of Amida’s working partaken in him. Shinran continues:

> Although I am without shame and self-reproach  
> And lack a mind of truth and sincerity,  
> Because the Name is directed by Amida  
> Its virtues fill the ten quarters.

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20 Shinran’s well-known verse in *Tannishō* goes, “But I am incapable of any other practice, so hell is decidedly my abode whatever I do.” [Ibid.], p.662.

21 [Ibid.], p. 421.
This is a religious experience of Shinran, a very personal and particular experience, which contains universality. When this personal, subjective and individual experience is shared with others, Amida’s directing of virtue for our return (gensō ekō) is then to come about at the same time.

Foolish Beings Possessed of Blind Passions and Caught in Birth-and-Death

Regarding foolish beings or bombu, we have examined two modes: “foolish beings possessed of blind passions—bonnō gusoku no bombu” and “foolish beings of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death—zaiaku shōji no bombu.” Both foolish beings possessed of blind passions and foolish beings of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death are not different beings but the same individuals viewed from different angles, inevitably experiencing dukkha as suffering and being crucially destined to hell. The purport of the compassionate Vow of Amida Buddha is solely for the sake of these bombu. Realization accordingly comes about through their insight into the nature of their falsehood and untruth and simultaneously through their encounter with that which encompasses the whole self.

In the very First Chapter of Tannishô, Shinran says:

Know that the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only shinjin is essential. For it is the Vow to save the person whose karmic evil is deep and grave and whose blind passions abound.

The intent of the Vow is to save the person (shujō) whose karmic evil is deep and grave (zaiaku jinjū) and whose blind passions abound (bonnō

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22 For some discussion on particularity and universality, see my paper “Particular and Universal Norms of Religious Values in Tannishô” in The Pure Land, New Series Nos. 21, The Journal of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies, December 2004, pp. 7-23. The paper expounds “the relationship between particularity and universality as they interrelate and coincide with each other—particularity being an individual expression or experience of universality, and universality as it manifests in particularity,” p. 8.

23 The issue of “directing of virtue for going forth” (ōsō ekō) and “directing of virtue for our return” (gensō ekō) focused in the present life will be discussed in the future paper.

24 CWS 1, p. 661.
And only shinjin is essential, shinjin consisting of two realizations such as the “profound realization of oneself as incapable of enlightenment” and the “profound realization of Amida’s working partaken in one.”

Shinjin literally means one’s “entrusting heart/mind” to the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha, which is religious experience of non-dualism. Shinjin is then one’s personal extraordinary experience of encountering the working of Amida Buddha’s compassion as one negates one’s self-contrivance or self-calculation. Shinran further says that this shinjin is Buddha-nature, which is Dharma-nature or Dharma-body—that which is unsurpassed. In *Notes on ‘Essential of Faith Alone,’* Shinran expounds:

*Nirvana* has innumerable names. It is impossible to give them in detail; I list only a few. Nirvana is called extinction of passions, the uncreated, peaceful happiness, eternal bliss, true reality, dharma-body, dharma-nature, suchness, oneness, and Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is none other than Tathagata. This Tathagata pervades the countless worlds; it fills the hearts and minds of the ocean of all beings. Thus, plants, trees, and land all attain Buddhahood.

Since it is with this heart and mind of all sentient beings that they entrust themselves to the Vow of the dharma-body as compassionate means, this shinjin is none other than Buddha-nature. This Buddha-nature is dharma-nature. Dharma-nature is dharma-body. For this reason there are two kinds of dharma-body with regard to the Buddha. The first is called dharma-body as suchness and the second, dharma-body as compassionate means. Dharma-body as suchness has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it. From this oneness was manifested form, called dharma-body as companionate means.  

Shinran here says that shinjin is Buddha-nature, which is *Dharma-kāya* or Dharma-body, in other words, Tathagata. Tathagata is another name for Buddha, so shinjin is Buddha itself. Shinjin is thus obtained when one totally negates oneself, as Buddha or Tathagata reveals as shinjin. Just as one’s right hand cannot grasp its own right hand, one cannot negate oneself by oneself. Self-negation on the side of a person is an indispensable factor when it comes to one’s undergoing of religious experience. Only when one

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encounters that which is unsurpassed, one can undergo one’s own self-negation, being absorbed with that which is unsurpassed. Yet, as one still has to live with one’s body and mind, one comes to realize that one’s body and mind is empty and false, and that that which is unsurpassed is true and real. This realization involves the unity of polarity: one’s empty and false heart/mind is sustained and encompassed by that which is unsurpassed, as that which is unsurpassed simultaneously sprouts out from within one’s heart/mind, which is shinjin. One’s empty and false heart/mind is the very place where that which is unsurpassed manifests and blooms.

**Concluding Perspectives**

We have examined the nature of things—impermanent and ever-changing, and the nature of beings—clinging, self-centered and false, and, as a result of this, *duhkha* arises as suffering. Hell is then our destiny as we are foolish beings or *bombu* of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death. In the very midst of this realization of our hopelessness and helplessness, however, we encounter that which is unsurpassed: the intent of the compassionate Vow is for the sake of those people, and the Vow sprouts in and coincides with such realization of *bombu*—the coincidence of “that which is empty and false” and “that which is true and real,” i.e., dynamism in the form of non-dualism, which is a common and profound way of religious experience.

The 21st century is facing so many problems in spite of the fact that we are leading a comfortable and convenient life. For the convenience and luxury that we enjoy today thanks to the development of modern technology, we are sacrificing very many things—the destruction of the environment and slaughter including indiscriminative terrorism. The problem seems to lie in the fact that we are not able to become aware of our own self-centeredness or our egocentricity. We may say that we know this, “People are all self-centered;” yet, a genuine realization of one’s own self-centeredness is very hard to come by. In the very core of our ego, we still try to justify ourselves. Realization of our true nature of self-centeredness and egoism comes about when we encounter that which is unsurpassed. That which is unsurpassed is not that which governs or controls us, according to the law of the Buddhist teachings, but that which frees us from the bondage of birth-and-death.

It is sad to see that the monotheistic religions today are facing conflicts because of the claim of their ideologies and the assertion of their dogmas, though they, in an ultimate sense, do seek peace of the world and love for humankind. We cannot help but say that religions have been used wrongly by some people. We need to take pause here to think twice in order
to overcome the exclusiveness that religions often preach.

In Shinran’s teaching as well as in the general teaching of Buddhism, the nature of things is after all impermanent and ever-changing, and we are not able to evade attachment to them, being ignorant about them. Yet, we are able to aspire to the Vow. We may not be able to solve the problems that we are facing today in this contemporary world. Yet, we can try to live in and for the Vow, which one may say is a particular claim, as this derives from a certain position.

Universality, however, reveals when one realizes the meaning of this aspiration. The expression of a person, in a secular sense, who has come to realize and deeply appreciate love or friendship of another person (mother, father, sister, brother, friend, lover, or so on), after having gone through struggles and hardships—“You are the only and single person that I really love in the whole world”—does not mean to deny “love for humankind” in a general and broader sense. This person is embraced and revived through having been subjected to love or friendship of other single person, starting a new life working and serving for the sake of others according to one’s own capacity.

Religious values lie first in the core of the person, in the very heart/mind of the person who seeks freedom and liberation from the bondage of suffering or duhkha in birth-and-death, and the path one takes should be very subjective and particular. Through the particular and subjective path that we take and lead, we come to realize a universal norm of religious values. Exclusiveness of others is the problem that we have to conquer.

In Tannishō Shinran says:

> With a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real.26

Shinran negates the absolutised secular values of bombu but does not absolutise the nembutsu or excludes others for the affirmation of the nembutsu. Shinran has encountered that which is unsurpassed in the changing nature of the world, expressing freedom and liberation in the nembutsu, returning back in the here and now. “The nembutsu alone is true

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26 Ibid., p. 679.
and real” is the expression of Shinran’s self-awareness of his being a foolish being or bombu, having been encompassed by the companionate Vow of Amida Buddha—which is “thoroughgoing”—where we are able to appreciate the religious experience of Shinran, which is universal in the values of other religious traditions as well.